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ABSTRACT

A study investigated whether females differ from males in their self-perception of competence before and after public relations training, and whether females approaching the study of public relations conceptualize the field differently from males. Subjects, 40 undergraduate public relations students, (22 females and 18 males), who were enrolled in consecutive terms of a public relations skills course, were administered a public relations skills self-evaluation test both at the onset of the course and at the close of the course. Subjects marked on a five-point scale whether they considered themselves to be "not very skilled" or "very skilled" in each of 14 areas of expertise pinpointed by researchers to be common public relations skills. Exit interviews were also used to determine student attitudes about their experience in the course. Results showed that, before classroom training, males' self-perception of their competence in common public relations skills was significantly higher than that of females. After training, however, there was no longer a significant difference between male and female self-perceptions of competence. In addition, there were important differences in how males and females conceptualize common public relations skills as indicated by the number of underlying dimensions which each grouped the skills into and how the skills were grouped along those dimensions. (Four tables of data are included, and 30 references and a personal skills assessment form are appended.) (ARH)

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Public Relations Division
(Teaching Standards)

DO FEMALE STUDENTS APPROACH THE STUDY OF PUBLIC RELATIONS WITH DIFFERENT PERCEPTIONS OF SKILLS FROM THOSE OF MALE STUDENTS?

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DO FEMALE STUDENTS APPROACH THE STUDY OF PUBLIC RELATIONS WITH DIFFERENT PERCEPTIONS OF SKILLS FROM THOSE OF MALE STUDENTS?

INTRODUCTION

Individuals may have differing self-perceptions of their level of competence in public relations skills before and after training. Individuals also may conceptualize the field differently before they begin studying it and after they have engaged in systematic study. Because considerable research and discussion have addressed the issue of female participation in public relations (Hunt & Thompson, 1987), this paper will seek to find out if females differ from males in their self-perception of competence before and after training, and if females approaching the study of public relations conceptualize the field differently than do males.

It is hoped that results of this preliminary study will provide both practitioners and teachers of public relations with some tentative insights into how public relations may benefit from the increasingly large percentage of public relations students and practitioners who are women. This study concludes that male teachers, and possibly practitioners, who approach public relations from their own male perspectives may be missing opportunities to more fully employ the differing but complementary conceptualizations and perceptions that women bring to public relations.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Women in Public Relations

The feminization of at least the lower levels of the public relations profession is no longer news. With slightly more than 50 percent of the practitioners in the field female, and an even higher ratio of women to men in the college public relations classroom, the "tilt" in the field has already happened. (Hunt and Thompson, 1987; Winkelman, 1986; Teahan, 1984, Bates, 1983). The current discussion focuses on the effects of this tilt. Bates (1984) takes the view that women's writing skills attract them to the field. Joseph (1986) finds that men are turning away from public relations because they do not want to work for women and/or they think it is not a good field for those who want to advance in the business world. Some are concerned that male-dominated big business firms want to deal with PR agencies headed by men (Bernstein, 1986). Others see a danger in the field of public relations becoming a "velvet ghetto" (Cline, et al, 1986), or of women remaining in technician roles while men move on to managerial roles (Broom & Dozier, 1986).

Teaching and Perception

Only a small segment of the literature concerning classroom teaching of public relations and organizational communication writing and campaigns courses focuses on the students' perception of the field they are studying, and little on sex differences. Of far greater concern have been the issues of which department should have responsibility for such courses (Wakefield and Cottone, 1986; Haynes, 1981) and what courses should constitute the public relations major or concentration (Agee, 1979; Brody, 1984; Reports of the Commission on Public Relations Education, 1975, 1981 and 1987).

Growing emphasis has been placed on stimulating students to understand the thought process behind performance of public relations tasks (Fegley and Detweiler, 1983; Moriarity, 1983; Strange and Kebell, 1984; Whitlow, 1983). A few studies have suggested that simulations are useful devices for making students cognizant of their own role in the learning process (Pavlik, 1988 in press; Hunt et al, 1985). Lewis, Woodward and Bell (1988) studied methods for teaching large sections of business communication courses and detected a trend toward helping students to learn problem-solving skills. The authors noted that students become more responsible for their own learning when they are placed in small study/working units. Rayfield and Pincus (1987) suggest that students demonstrate greater involvement in a public relations campaign course when they have some control over how it is run.

Skills

Recently, however, more emphasis has been put on ascertaining what specific skills and knowledge are required by public relations practitioners. Wakefield and Cottone (1987) asked public relations department heads, agency heads, and presidents of companies to rank knowledge/skill areas and label them as to importance. They found that the top skills were those that enable the public relations employee to work with clients, to make decisions and to solve problems. These were labeled "very important" by the respondents. The next cluster of skills, labeled "moderately important," included the technical abilities to write, edit and design messages. Other surveys of public relations professionals showed that they continue to see writing skills, especially newswriting, as most important for entry-level practitioners (Shelly, 1981; O'Brien and Shelly, 1983; Baxter, 1986).

Validation of Skills

The issue of whether students should be encouraged to seek validation of their knowledge and skills through a nationwide competency test was explored by the Public Relations Society of America and the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (Hunt & VanLeuven, 1984), but the concept was rejected as too cumbersome and frought with legal implications.

In a recent article, Hunt (1988) suggested that the first step toward professionalism is when the student takes charge of his or her own public relations career by packaging himself or herself as a "product," complete with resume, portfolio, and understanding of how the package is marketed to the potential employer.

Research Questions

The foregoing review of the literature suggests two questions that this study will investigate. Research questions, rather than formal hypotheses, are indicated because of the exploratory nature of this study which seeks to see if the study of male-female differences on self-perception of competence and conceptualization of public relations skills before and after training is a fruitful area for public relations research.

Research Question 1 -- Do males and females differ in their self-perceived competence in public relations before and after receiving training in the field?

Research Question 2 -- Do males and females differ in how they conceptualize necessary public relations skills before and after studying the field?

METHODOLOGY

Subjects

Subjects for this study were 40 undergraduate public relations students, 22 females and 18 males, enrolled in one fall and one spring term of a public relations skills course. While the sample employed is proper for an exploratory study, the authors caution that this sample limits the generalizability of the results in at least four ways. First, by employing students, results may be limited to persons studying public relations as opposed to practicing it. Second, subjects are of a relatively uniform age. Age and resulting work or study experience may be an important variable in self-perceived competence and how public relations is conceptualized. Indeed, changes in these two variables over the course of just one class suggest this is so. Third, previous exposure to related skills and competence-building experiences was not controlled for.[1] Finally, 40 subjects responding to a 14-item instrument fails to maintain the 5-to-1 ratio of subjects to items which many sources recommend for factor analysis, so labeling and interpreting the factors would be misleading. This study does, however, generally maintain a more than 3-to-1 ratio of variables to factors, as recommended by other authorities, notably Kim and Mueller (1978).

Instrument

A "Personal Skills Assessment" form (Appendix 1) was created, listing "skills used by people who work in the areas of public relations and organizational communication." It included very specific skills such as writing news releases for the print media and writing public service announcements for the broadcast media. It also included generic skills such as analyzing advertisements and working with a client.

The list of 14 skills areas was adapted from the syllabus of the course in which the subjects enrolled. Skills such as writing news releases and radio spots, writing basic advertising copy, and preparing layouts are included in the list of weekly assignments for the course. Interpersonal skills such as working with the client or informing a superior of a client's needs are described in the introductory materials to the course as being equally important as technical skills.

The course design, in turn, is linked to the content of the textbook, Grunig and Hunt's Managing Public Relations (1984), specifically Part IV, chapters 19 through 32, Managing Public Relations Techniques." The text's content and focus are consistent with the guidelines for the content of a "Public Relations Communication" course, as spelled out in the Report of the 1987 Commission on Undergraduate Public Relations Education. That report calls for instruction in planning, writing, producing and delivering print and electronic messages (p.11) and also emphasizes the importance of enhancing technical skills by learning to work in organizational contexts to fulfill objectives (p.24).

Procedure

The subjects were required at the second class meeting of the course to mark on a five-point Likert-type scale whether they considered themselves, at the outset of the course, to be "Not very skilled" (1) or "Very skilled" (5) in each area of expertise. Scores were computed by totaling responses for the 14 items.

It was explained to the students that they would be responding to the same questionnaire at the end of the course, but that both the entry-point and exit-point questionnaire would be saved for analysis after the course was over,

and that neither questionnaire would have any bearing on the course grade. The instructor for the course collected the entry-point survey instruments and placed them in an envelope for safekeeping. Similarly, the duplicate survey taken on the last day of the class was collected and saved until after course grades had been calculated.

As a qualitative validity check, student evaluations of the course, using a standard instrument employed by the department to evaluate course and teacher performance, were analyzed. Exit interviews were also used to determine student attitudes about their experience in the course.[2]

Statistical Procedures

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) and t-tests were used to analyze differences in self-perceived competence. Factor analysis employing a Varimax rotation was employed to assess conceptualization of skills.

RESULTS

Limitations

This section reports results of statistical tests on male/female differences with respect to self-perceived competence in public relation skills. Also reported are full factor loadings for before and after training for both males and females. Factor loadings are presented to indicate the different numbers of, and kinds of, underlying dimensions that may characterize the approaches of males and females to public relations. Factors are not named because the purpose of this study is to see if there are differences which warrant further study. A full naming and explication of the dimensional difference will require a much larger n than 40 and is beyond the scope of this paper.

Self-Perceived Competence

Grade Point Average.

To eliminate one possible confounding variable, student's cumulative grade point average was recorded. GPA was not significantly correlated with self-perceived competence either before training ($r=-.23$, $p.=>.15$) or after training ($r=-.12$, $p=>.45$).

Effect of Training.

Students' self-perceived competence after training ($M=56.82$)

was significantly greater (t=17.04, df=39, p=<.001) than their self-perceived competence before training (M=28.15).

Differences Between Sexes.

Males' perception of their competence in 14 public relations skill areas (M= 31.56) was significantly higher than females' assessments (M=25.36) before training (F=4.30, df=1/38, p=<.05).

There was no significant difference between male (M=57.00) and female (M=56.68) self-assessment of competence in public relations skill areas after training (F=.02, df=1/38, p=>.89).

Conceptualization of Public Relations Skills

Before Training.

Before training, males grouped the 14 skill areas assessed in the instrument into three factors which explained 72.7% of the variance in their responses, see Table 1. Females grouped the 14 skill areas into five factors which explained 82.6% of the variance in their responses, see Table 2.

After Training.

After training, males and females both grouped the 14 skill areas assessed by the instrument into four factors which explained 76.9% of the variance in the males' responses and 78%

of the variance in the females' responses. However, the males (see Table 3) grouped the items into different factors than the females (see Table 4).

Table 1
Males Before Training

Item	F1	F2	F3
Writing News Releases for Use by Print Media	.245	.786*	-.007
Writing Public Service Announcements for Radio	.689*	.368	.342
Preparing a Script or Storyboard for a TV Spot	.646*	-.157	-.107
Conceiving of a Name, Slogan and Basic Copy for Product	.785*	.453	-.105
Analyzing and Critiquing the Elements of a Display Ad	.783*	.298	.132
Writing Dialog for a Radio Spot to Sell a Product or Service	.556	.650*	-.112
Preparing a Press Kit for a Client's Product or Service	.435	-.057	.694*
Critiquing a Brochure Design and Suggesting Changes	.847*	-.163	.365
Preparing a Rough Dummy for an Original Brochure/Flyer	.685*	.583	.041
Rewriting a Speech so that it Fits the Speaker's Style	-.304	.096	.738*
Working With a Client to Assure Objectives are Clear	.275	.744*	.433
Working as Part of an Account Team to Prepare Campaign Materials	.353	.319	.759*
Writing Memo to Your Superior Analyzing Client's Campaign	-.217	.712*	.556
Writing a "Feature Treatment" Release for Print Media	.068	.712*	.158
Eigenvalue	6.412	2.282	1.487
Percent of Variance	45.8	16.3	10.6
Total Percent of Variance Explained=72.7%			

Table 2
Females Before Training

Item	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5
Writing News Releases for Use by Print Media	.263	.763*	.322	.052	.230
Writing Public Service Announcements for Radio	.076	.125	.316	.611*	.523*
Preparing a Script or Storyboard for a TV Spot	.087	.040	-.115	.875*	.140
Conceiving of a Name, Slogan and Basic Copy for Product	.895*	.614	.248	-.054	.065
Analyzing and Critiquing the Elements of a Display Ad	.609*	-.029	.134	.599*	-.263
Writing Dialog for a Radio Spot to Sell a Product or Service	.070	.054	-.078	.084	.966*
Preparing a Press Kit for a Clients Product or Service	-.227	.825*	-.039	-.132	-.175
Critiquing a Brochure Design and Suggesting Changes	.886*	.002	.028	.167	.047
Preparing a Rough Dummy for an Original Brochure/Flyer	.832*	.190	.280	.193	.155
Rewriting a Speech so that it Fits the Speaker's Style	.582*	-.070	.330	.553*	-.076
Work With a Client to Assure Objectives are Clear	.224	.259	.877*	-.082	-.102
Working as Part of an Account Team to Prepare Campaign Materials	.002	.627*	.313	-.020	.425
Writing Memo to Your Superior Analyzing Client's Campaign	.256	.019	.895*	.152	.102
Writing a "Feature Treatment" Release for Print Media	.348	.734*	-.043	.408	.035
Eigenvalue	5.188	2.330	1.735	1.290	1.023
Percent of Variance	37.1	16.6	12.4	9.2	7.3
Total Percent of Variance Explained=82.6%					

Table 3
Males After Training

Item	F1	F2	F3	F4
Writing News Releases for Use by Print Media	-.032	.907*	-.090	-.123
Writing Public Service Announcements for Radio	.580*	.176	.220	.619*
Preparing a Script or Storyboard for a TV Spot	.116	-.102	-.021	.905*
Conceiving of a Name, Slogan and Basic Copy for Product	.777*	-.094	-.159	.208
Analyzing and Critiquing the Elements of a Display Ad	.530*	-.267	.410	-.108
Writing Dialog for a Radio Spot to Sell a Product or Service	.696*	.340	.201	.139
Preparing Press Kit for a Client's Product or Service	.252	.500*	.397	-.267
Critiquing a Brochure Design and Suggesting Changes	.920*	-.023	.171	-.006
Preparing a Rough Dummy for an Original Brochure/Flyer	.634*	.050	.643*	.215
Rewriting a Speech so that it Fits the Speaker's Style	-.116	.764*	.542*	.069
Work With a Client to Assure Objectives are Clear	.069	.516*	.335	.189
Working as Part of an Account Team to Prepare Campaign Materials	.085	-.022	.908*	.054
Writing Memo to Your Superior Analyzing Client's Campaign	.449	.487	.497	-.213
Writing a "Feature Treatment" Release for Print Media	.043	.920*	-.133	.089
Eigenvalue	5.273	2.858	1.546	1.092
Percent of Variance	37.7	20.4	11.0	7.8

Total Percent of Variance Explained=76.9%

Table 4
Females After Training

Item	F1	F2	F3	F4
Writing News Releases for Use by Print Media	.369	.514*	.517*	.099
Writing Public Service Announcements for Radio	-.053	.072	.842*	.162
Preparing a Script or Storyboard for a TV Spot	.326	.760*	.132	.220
Conceiving of a Name, Slogan and Basic Copy for Product	.725*	.424	.314	.105
Analyzing and Critiquing the Elements of a Display Ad	.852*	.107	-.042	-.026
Writing Dialog for a Radio Spot to Sell a Product or Service	.140	-.104	.923*	.122
Preparing a Press Kit for a Client's Product or Service	.772*	.075	.369	.343
Critiquing a Brochure Design and Suggesting Changes	.731*	.205	.140	.127
Preparing a Rough Dummy for an Original Brochure/Flyer	.674	.614*	-.053	-.037
Rewriting a Speech so that it Fits the Speaker's Style	.598*	.556*	.292	-.183
Work With a Client to Assure Objectives are Clear	.058	.875*	-.029	.166
Working as Part of an Account Team to Prepare Campaign Materials	.189	.243	.246	.798*
Writing Memo to Your Superior Analyzing Client's Campaign	.431	.565*	.366	-.404*
Writing a "Feature Treatment" Release for Print Media	.322	.313	.783*	-.068
Eigenvalue	6.682	2.074	1.151	1.011
Percent of Variance	47.7	14.8	8.2	7.2
Total Percent of Variance Explained=78%				

DISCUSSION

Self-Perceived Competence

Grade Point Average.

Self-perceived competence in public relations skills might be related to a student's overall sense of competence. One indicator of overall competence which students might use is their overall competence in university work as reflected in their grade point average (GPA). However, student's self-perceived competence in common public relations skills was not correlated to their GPA either before classroom training or after classroom training. Had self-perceived competence been associated with GPA, the validity of this line of research would have been brought into question because variances in self-perceived competence could have been explained by GPA rather than the variables addressed in this study.

The most immediate and obvious source of alternate causality, GPA, has been accounted for. There may be sources of alternate causality beyond sex, training, and GPA however. Issues such as past experience, general aptitudes and other class training will be addressed as this line of research continues.

Effects of Training.

Overall, classroom training for one semester allowed students to see themselves as twice as competent at the end of the semester as they had perceived themselves to be at the beginning of the semester. While this result may be expected in

an introductory, or near introductory, level course, it is interesting nonetheless because it establishes that any changes which are different for the two sexes occur against a background of significant learning and are not an artifact of statistically significant but trivial improvements in self-assessments.

Differences Between the Sexes.

Before classroom training, males' self-perception of their competence in common public relations skills was significantly higher than that of females. After the classroom training, however, there was no longer a significant difference between male and female self-perceptions of competence. A superficial interpretation of these data would suggest that females learned more than males, at least in their own opinion. However, there may be other explanations. Males may have background experiences which allow them to see themselves, rightly or wrongly, as somewhat competent in basic public relations skills even before classroom training. Alternatively, women may have different background experiences which result in their assessing their competencies at a comparatively low level before classroom training. From a teacher's point of view an open minded student who is willing to accept that he or she does not "know it all" is sometimes desireable, but males pre-training scores were not so high as to suggest closed-mindedness. It should also be noted that on the 5-point Likert style scale used in this study males, by their higher starting assessments, left themselves less room

for improvement over the course of the semester while females left themselves comparatively more room for improvement. Some of the significantly greater improvement reported by females may be an artifact of the scale employed. Forthcoming research in this line will therefore employ a 7-point scale.

Research Question 1.

Within the limitations of this study, it does appear that males and females differ in their self-perceived competence in public relations before studying the field, but do not differ after studying the field.

Conceptualization of Public Relations Skills

Before Training.

There were important differences in how males and females conceptualize common public relations skills as indicated by the number of underlying dimensions which each grouped the skills into and how the skills were grouped along those dimensions. Before classroom training, women, at least the sample in this study (see "subjects"), approach the study of public relations through what might be labelled as a more cognitively complex perspective (five dimensions versus three dimensions) than do males. In addition, the more complex perspective of females explains more of the field to them, as indicated by the amount of explained variance in the females' five dimensions, than the

tree dimensions which seem to underlie male perceptions of the public relations skills. The first dimension is similar for males and females, sharing four skills.

After Training.

After classroom training, males and females appear to see basic public relations skills as grouped into the same number of underlying dimensions. The first and second dimensions for both sexes appear to be somewhat similar, with the first dimensions sharing 4 skills and the second dimensions sharing three skills. The third and fourth dimensions are entirely different after classroom training however.

Research Question 2.

Within the limitations of this study, it does appear that males and females differ in how they conceptualize necessary public relations skills before they study the field and, to a lesser extent, after they study the field.

Conclusion.

This study, while not exhaustive, appears to suggest that there may be differences in how males and females approach the field of public relations and how they conceptualize the skills in the field. Any disadvantage which females may perceive themselves as having in terms of competence in specific skills when approaching the field appear to be rapidly overcome so that

after even introductory level of training in the field the two sexes perceive themselves as equally competent in public relations skills.

In addition to equality of self-perceived competence between males and females however, the two sexes appear to differ in how they conceptualize or group the basic skills in public relations. With a self-perceived competence that is equal, females may, through their differing conceptualizations, have the potential to combine even long established public relations skills in new ways. This creative potential may manifest itself in creative insights, technical solutions, and relational skills which are both different from, and complementary to, well established approaches in this previously male dominated field.

The authors encourage other researchers to both reexamine the results reported here and examine the question of male/female differences in public relations with other approaches.

NOTES

1 The Association of American Colleges, in its 1982 report The Classroom Climate: A Chilly One for Women, recognized the fact that "Women and men students are likely to enter college with different educational histories -- even if they have attended the same elementary and high schools." Such a difference might help explain the reported disparity between entering males' and females' self perceptions of competence before training, although, for this particular sample, entering GPAs did not differ significantly. Future research along this line should control more fully for this possible confounding variable. It is not thought that academic preparation was a factor in the other major aspect of the study, conceptualization of the field.

2 It should be noted that the instructor of the course was a male. The course format involves working in "account teams" under the supervision of teaching assistants who are designated as "agency heads." One of the TAs was male and two were female. Thus, of the four role models provided for the students, an equal number were male and female.

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APPENDIX 1

192:313 Message Design: Personal Skills Assessment

NAME: DATE:

Following is a list of skills used by people who work in the areas of public relations and organizational communication. Next to each skill, circle the number that reflects your skills or abilities today.

	Not Very Skilled				Very Skilled
Writing news releases for use by the print media.	1	2	3	4	5
Writing public service announcemments for radio.	1	2	3	4	5
Preparing a script or storyboard for a TV spot.	1	2	3	4	5
Conceiving of a name, slogan and basic copy for a product.	1	2	3	4	5
Analyzing and critiquing the elements of a display ad.	1	2	3	4	5
Writing dialog for a radio spot to sell a product or service.	1	2	3	4	5
Preparing a press kit for a client's product or service.	1	2	3	4	5
Critiquing a brochure design and suggesting changes in it.	1	2	3	4	5
Preparing a rough dummy for an original brochure or flyer.	1	2	3	4	5
Rewriting a speech so that it fits the speaker's style.	1	2	3	4	5
Working with a client to assure that his objectives are clear.	1	2	3	4	5
Working as part of an account team to prepare campaign materials.	1	2	3	4	5
Writing a memo to your superior analyzing a client's campaign.	1	2	3	4	5
Writing a "feature treatment" news release for the print media.	1	2	3	4	5